

Teaching Drama Via Trials

By Wisam Mansour

I believe that students develop an understanding of how literature functions through their interactive engagement with the texts they study. Widdowson (1975) has argued convincingly that if we mean to develop the capacity in our students for independent reading and response, we must find means of engaging them actively in the exploration and interpretation of texts, not simply telling them what to see. However, some professors, for perhaps practical reasons of their own, volunteer an interpretation of the text and thus give the students the illusion that this text has that author/professor-intended meaning, and that is it. Therefore, as Lewis (1961:128) succinctly put it, for a large number of students, "literature continues to entail a concentration of cribs and lecture notes on books seen through the spectacle of other books." I also believe that the task of English teachers, as Rodger (1969: 89) suggested, is "not to hand over predigested meanings, but to teach students to read and interpret for themselves, to be reasonably skilled and sensitive readers, able to feel and judge for themselves, with fidelity to the textual facts, in response to any work of literature they may choose to read."

One way of engaging students' interest in a seemingly uninteresting play requires teachers to tailor activities that can take the students into the recesses of the text. In this paper I want to suggest a court trial as an activity for teaching drama to EFL students.

Let Us Go to Court

Trials can be activities of interest. Simulating the setting and atmosphere of a court room, with its prosecutors, attorneys, judges, bailiffs and so on, produces simultaneous fun and learning. I conducted this activity with my EFL students, who were very reluctant and wry when they were first told that they will be studying Macbeth. I observed that before the activity, students could not go beyond the basic tale of the play. For the best of them, "Macbeth is a play about the rise and death of an ambitious commander through the aid of his relatively evil wife and other circumstances"; or "the play is about the heinous deed of Macbeth and his wife, who eventually received their punishment in accordance with the principle of divine justice." To override students' reluctance to read the play critically, a court is simulated in the class. The purpose of the court is to try Macbeth, his wife, and any other suspect, and to produce a critique of the persons involved (characters) and of the circumstances behind the occurrences that lead to the tragedy.

Procedures

1. The class assumes that Macbeth and his wife are caught alive, and their rights are read to them.

2. Each student in the class is given a role: a prosecutor, an attorney, or one of the suspects — Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, one of the witches, or one of the witnesses. The witnesses can be all the other characters except those who are killed by Macbeth earlier in the play, such as Duncan, his guards, Banquo, and Macduff's family. Finally, the teacher can play the judge (this is optional), or if the class is big the teacher can have a jury to engage as many students as possible.
3. Students are briefed on the court procedures and are given enough time (a week or so) for preparation and consultation, during which they are supposed to read the text thoroughly and prepare their accusation lists, defenses, and testimonies.
4. Students are shown and taught that the text can yield so many interpretations. Each one is valid as long as it can be backed by the actual lines of the text.
5. In case of any controversy or dispute among those involved in the trial, the lines of the text are the final arbiter. This is to say that controversial readings or interpretations should be resolved by referring to the text.

Eventually the trial of Macbeth and his wife took us three class sessions, through which amazing analysis of the Macbeths and the rest of the characters popped up in a very studied manner.

Results

Activities of this sort can:

1. Motivate students to read with a specific focus in mind. That is, if the student is to play the role of Macduff, then the student will have to focus on Macduff's personality and his interrelationship with the rest of the characters.
2. Make students discuss the text with each other outside of class before coming to trial to avoid surprises in the court.
3. Give students room for creativity as they begin to see through and beyond the text.
4. Allow students to communicate in class verbally and with confidence as the game-like analysis of the play takes the form of a game.

Conclusion

This activity can be applied to a wide array of dramas ranging from Greek to postmodern. For example, maybe it is of great interest to students to try Oedipus and/or his mother-wife in Sophocles's Oedipus Rex and observe the final verdict in the light of whatever circumstances the students want to consider. The same can be said about retrying Shylock in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, in which Shylock took his case to court. The new court has to proceed perhaps without the cunning of Portia disguised as a young lawyer! The outcome of the trial

depends on the students' imaginations and their ability to grasp the original text. The same can be applied to plays such as Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in which the class can try Nora, Helmer, and Krogstad. Another possibility is Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, in which students can try Jimmy for his inconsiderate and insensitive behavior that leads to the plight of Alison, or try Alison for the negligence that leads to her miscarriage. In any case, trials can add a touch of creativity and liveliness to the class, and improve communications in the classroom.

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References

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